Atomic Diplomacy:  
*A Study in Creative Writing* 

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In 1965 Gar Alperovitz published *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam: The Use of the Atomic Bomb and the American Confrontation with Soviet Power*, a dramatically "revisionist" essay on the origins of the Cold War. Since then his book has become a staple of "New Left" historiography, portions of it can be found in the most popular anthologies, and even those "orthodox" historians who do not accept its conclusions generally have treated the work as a scholarly enterprise. Atomic Diplomacy, Christopher Lasch has proclaimed, "made it difficult for conscientious scholars any longer to avoid the challenge of revisionist interpretations." That orthodox historians have not responded more vigorously to revisionism as exemplified by *Atomic Diplomacy* is surprising, for an examination of the sources upon which it is based reveals that the book is unable to withstand close scrutiny.

The bulk of Alperovitz's work is devoted to showing that from the time Harry S. Truman assumed the presidency he undertook to reverse Franklin D. Roosevelt's policy of cooperation with the Soviet Union, thereby precipitating the Cold War. In direct violation of wartime agreements, some explicit and

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some understood, Truman sought to construct an American-dominated world order (particularly in Eastern Europe and the Far East) at the end of World War II. When economic coercion failed to achieve this goal, Alperovitz claimed, Truman waited until the United States acquired the atomic bomb with which he meant to cow the Russians into submission. The use of nuclear weapons against an already defeated Japan, according to this view, amounted to a diplomatic rather than a military act. The evidence "strongly suggests," he wrote, that the bombs were used primarily to demonstrate to the Russians the enormous power America would have in its possession during subsequent negotiations. As a lesser factor, he cited the wish to end the war quickly before they could establish a strong position in the Far East. Although denying that he intended to present a systematic analysis of Soviet diplomacy, Alperovitz depicted Joseph Stalin as merely trying to attain for the Soviet Union its legitimate security needs in the face of increasing American militance.

One of the more common flaws in the book is Alperovitz's practice of citing statements in support of his arguments which, in context, refer to other subjects altogether. The opening paragraph of his first chapter is typical:

Only eleven days had passed since the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The new President of the United States prepared for his first meeting with a representative of the Soviet Union. Rehearsing his views on the subject of the negotiation—a reorganization of the Polish government—Truman declared that if the Russians did not care to cooperate, 'they could go to hell.'

The quotation, from Charles E. Bohlen's notes of the conversation, is cited correctly, but applied to the wrong issue. In context Truman was referring to the possibility that the Russians might boycott the founding conference of the United Nations if they did not get their way on Poland. "'He intended to go on with the plans for San Francisco,'" Bohlen reported him as saying, "'and if the Russians did not wish to join us they could go to hell....'" Alperovitz's version helps to establish Truman's intransigency on the Polish question, but it is incorrect.

Contending that American policy makers at an early date meant to influence events in Eastern Europe "behind Red Army lines," to cite another example, Alperovitz wrote that "What went on in the liberated areas had already been defined as 'of urgent importance to the U.S.' by the time Truman took office." His source for this quotation is a state department position paper, reprinted in Truman's Memoirs: Year of Decisions. The words are taken from the first sentence of a paragraph headed: "SUPPLIES FOR LIBERATED AREAS" and the entire

5 Ibid., 19.
6 Walter Millis, ed., The Forrestal Diaries (New York, 1951), 50.
7 Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy, 25.
sentence reads: "A problem of urgent importance to the U.S. is that of supplies for areas liberated from enemy occupation." Since the point was made earlier in the paper that "In the liberated areas under Soviet control, the Soviet Government is proceeding largely on a unilateral basis . . . ," it seems almost certain that the passage in question has to do with administering regions captured by western armies. Yet, in Alperovitz's hands, it became an expression of intended interference in Soviet-held territory.

In developing his thesis that Truman initially seized upon economic leverage to gain his ends in Eastern Europe, Alperovitz again used words having to do with one subject to apply to another. He assigned to W. Averell Harriman, then ambassador to Russia, a great deal of influence in converting Truman to this project. In his discussion of alleged debates over curtailing lend lease aid as a primary tool, Alperovitz quoted Harriman as arguing that the United States "should retain current control of . . . credits (to the Russians) in order to be in a position to protect American vital interests in the formulative period immediately following the war." A look at the source for this remark, however, reveals that Harriman's statement did not pertain to lend lease at all, but to postwar dollar credits. Alperovitz's excision of the word "these" ("these credits") transformed the sentence into something Harriman never said.

Time sequences fared as badly in Atomic Diplomacy as did subject matter. At the conclusion of the paragraph containing Harriman's altered sentence (a paragraph dealing with events in April-May 1945), Alperovitz cited General John R. Deane, chief of the United States Military Mission in Moscow, to show what American leaders believed lend lease curtailment would accomplish: "This would increase America's economic leverage and would 'make the Soviet authorities come to us,' as Deane had phrased it." Actually, Deane's phrase appeared in a letter he wrote to General George C. Marshall in December 1944, months before the so-called "debates" took place. What Deane really said is of interest too: "We should stop pushing ourselves on them and make the Soviet authorities come to us. We should be friendly and co-operative when they do so." This hardly amounts to a recipe for coercion.

Another example of faulty chronology can be found in Alperovitz's analysis of what American leaders believed possession of atomic weapons would enable them to extract from the Russians. In the context of post-Alamagordo appraisals of the possibilities, Alperovitz wrote of Secretary of State James F. Byrnes' "new

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9 Ibid., 15.
10 Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy, 35.
11 Millis, ed., Forrestal Diaries, 41.
12 Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy, 36.
advice" to Truman that "'The bomb might well put us in a position to dictate our own terms...'." The words attributed to Byrnes were what Truman recalled him as having said in April 1945. And Alperovitz’s omission of the latter part of Byrnes’ statement, "at the end of the war," is, to say the least, misleading. As Truman’s prose makes clear, the statement he ascribed to Byrnes referred to terms with Japan "at the end of the war," not terms with Russia after it."

Indeed, Alperovitz’s use of hiatuses in Atomic Diplomacy often resulted in discrepancies of the gravest kind. Assessing the significance of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Alperovitz wrote that "Truman has characterized the result: 'Our dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan... forced Russia to reconsider her position in the Far East.'" Here he omitted the word "had" which, if left in, might have suggested what Truman actually referred to; Russia’s decision to join the war against Japan as soon as she did (even though certain preconditions had yet to be fulfilled) rather than her behavior vis-à-vis the United States after the war ended. "Without warning, while Russian-Chinese negotiations were still far from agreement," Truman wrote, "[Vyacheslav M.] Molotov sent for Ambassador Harriman on August 8 and announced to him that the Soviet Union would consider itself at war with Japan as of August 9. This move did not surprise us. Our dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan had forced Russia to reconsider her position in the Far East.'"

Often Alperovitz pared remarks in such a way as to render them inappropriate to the context in which he presented them. In a chapter entitled "The Decision to Postpone a Confrontation with Stalin" he tried to show that Truman’s refusal to attend a meeting of the Big Three before July 1945 was part of an agreed-upon strategy to hold off a showdown with the Russians until the United States had the nuclear bomb to shake at them. Admitting that he could find no direct evidence for this theory, Alperovitz sought to build a circumstantial case by belittling Truman’s announced reasons. He quoted the President as having refused to attend solely on the ground that he had to prepare a "'budget message,'" which excuse Alperovitz disparaged as "'impossibly weak.'" In fact Truman said he had to contend with "a number of pressing domestic questions," the budget message “particularly” because the fiscal year was com-

14 Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy, 229.
15 Truman, Memoirs, 87. Harry S. Truman’s next sentence reads: "[Henry L.] Stimson, on the other hand, seemed at least as much concerned with the role of the atomic bomb in the shaping of history as in its capacity to shorten this war." This would make it seem obvious that James F. Byrnes’ statement had referred to shortening the war.
16 Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy, 191.
17 Truman, Memoirs, 425.
18 Both quotations from Alperovitz Atomic Diplomacy, 67.
ing to an end.\textsuperscript{19} Alperovitz's need to establish that a "strategy" existed is crucial to his theme, for it enabled him to argue that seemingly conciliatory moves by Truman—such as sending Harry Hopkins to Moscow—were but cynical steps in the grand design.\textsuperscript{20}

Another instance of this practice can be seen in the author's conclusions about Truman's overall conduct toward the Soviet Union. . . . "[t]he President's attitude," he wrote, "is best summed up in the statement he made eight days after Roosevelt's death: He 'intended to be firm with the Russians and make no concessions.'\textsuperscript{21} The latter part of the quoted sentence, which Alperovitz left out, reads: "from American principles or traditions in order to win their favor." Truman did not say that he would make "no concessions" and, in the same paragraph, he alluded to the need for establishing relations on "a give-and-take basis."\textsuperscript{22}

Perhaps the most amusing illustration of this kind occurred in Alperovitz's efforts to show Truman's disappointment at learning that technical difficulties would postpone the nuclear test until after the Potsdam meeting had begun. Referring to the President's state of mind at that time, Alperovitz wrote that "Truman made no attempt to hide his feelings: 'I am getting ready to go see Stalin and [Winston] Churchill, and it is a chore. . . . Wish I didn't have to go,}

\textsuperscript{19} Memorandum by the Acting Secretary of State, May 15, 1945, Department of State, \textit{Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers: The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference)} (2 vols., Washington, 1960), I, 13. And, as one might expect, the preparation of a budget message depended upon the preparation of a budget. "This was to be my first budget as President," Truman later wrote, "and I hoped to be able to justify every detail it contained." Truman, \textit{Memoirs}, 99. That the problems of converting to a peacetime economy did comprise one of Truman's larger concerns can be seen in his \textit{Memoirs}, 58-59, 95-99, 226-27. Truman explained in some detail the problems involved to Anthony Eden and other British leaders only a week after Winston Churchill first suggested a meeting. See Memorandum by the Acting Secretary of State, May 14, 1945, \textit{Foreign Relations . . . (The Potsdam Conference)}, I, 11.

\textsuperscript{20} There is evidence to show that when Truman, on May 28, asked that the meeting date be changed from "early" July (the time he suggested in response to Churchill's inquiry) to July 15, he had the atomic tests in mind. Richard G. Hewlett and Oscar E. Anderson, Jr., \textit{A History of the United States Atomic Energy Commission: The New World, 1939/1946} (University Park, Pa., 1962), 352. This date, however, is far too late to support Alperovitz's "strategy" thesis. Actually, Alperovitz's chronology is quite muddled through the first three chapters. In Chapter I, "The Strategy of an Immediate Showdown," he argued that the chief component of this strategy was curtailment of lend lease aid. Truman's memorandum ordering the cutback was issued May 11, 1945. In Chapter II, "The Strategy of a Delayed Showdown," and in Chapter III, "The Decision to Postpone a Confrontation with Stalin," Alperovitz contended that the President, sometime between late April and early May, decided to postpone a showdown with Joseph Stalin until the United States had obtained the bomb. In an appendix, Alperovitz estimated the date of this decision as April 25, \textit{more than two weeks before} the curtailment of lend lease. He tried to explain this discrepancy with the comment that Truman "held on to his firm line of policy while he secretly prepared his new approach." Alperovitz, \textit{Atomic Diplomacy}, 272. If true, Truman guarded his secret well for no evidence has yet surfaced to show that he was preparing a new approach. For an effective rebuttal of the notion that lend lease curtailment was designed to coerce Russia, see George C. Herring, Jr., "Lend-Lease to Russia and the Origins of the Cold War, 1944-1945," \textit{Journal of American History}, LVI (June 1969), 93-114.

\textsuperscript{21} Alperovitz, \textit{Atomic Diplomacy}, 231.

\textsuperscript{22} Truman, \textit{Memoirs}, 71.
but I do, and it can't be stopped now.'”

Again the hiatus produced a most serious distortion, this time replacing “I have to take my tuxedo, tails . . . preacher coat, high hat, low hat and hard hat as well as sundry other things,” and another sentence in the same vein. What Alperovitz presented as the words of President Truman, global strategist, turns out to be ol’ cap’n Harry, complaining to “Mama and Mary” about the formalities he would have to endure.

The heaviest concentration of misrendered sources appears in Alperovitz’s account of how Americans assessed political conditions in Eastern Europe by mid-1945. Because it is central to his theme that Truman, not Stalin, meant to renege on previous agreements, Alperovitz went to great lengths to show that on balance Stalin lived up to understandings reached at Yalta and elsewhere. In his passages on the situation in Hungary as of July 1945, for instance, Alperovitz cited a state department Briefing Book Paper as having reported that “power was exercised by ‘a coalition government headed by a conservative general (which) includes representatives of the five principal parties of the center and the left.... There has been no attempt ... to substitute a purely leftist regime for the present coalition government.’” That is not what the paper said. The quoted description of the coalition government is transcribed correctly, but the point made in the paper is that the coalition government did not exercise power. “Real political power,” it said, “resides not in the cabinet or the assembly but in the party organizations and leaders, of whom the Communists, encouraged by the presence of the Red Army, are the strongest.”

Alperovitz’s statement that “the State Department believed that Communist political strength was increasing due to the presence of the Red Army” mitigates but does not compensate for this distortion.

Reports on conditions in Bulgaria, as they appear in Atomic Diplomacy, yield similar infidelities. Writing of the “Fatherland Front” government under Colonel Kimon Georgiev, Alperovitz quoted the state department representative in Bulgaria as having described Georgiev as “‘a true conservative in his views of the sacredness of private property (otherwise he could never have held highest political office in country)....’” Omitted from this sentence is the first word “While” (“While a true conservative”), and the latter half which reads: “he is a Simon pure totalitarian when it comes to party govt and state control of private

23 Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy, 145.
24 Truman, Memoirs, 331 (Truman’s ellipsis).
25 Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy, 139.
27 Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy, 139.
28 Ibid., 206.
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initiative.” Because of this and other observations along the same lines, the report’s author declared that it “is not unnatural that he should be prepared to go along with Communists who want to take country full way along Soviet road and who will never be content merely with a permanent pro-Soviet orientation of Bulgarian foreign policy.” As in the case of Hungary, Alperovitz did not question the accuracy of the reports, he simply misrepresented what they contained.

From the Henry L. Stimson diaries, Alperovitz has the then secretary of war on May 14, 1945, discussing “the role of the bomb and European diplomacy with British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, outlining ‘to him the progress which we have made and the timetable as it stood now, and . . . its bearing upon our present problems of an international character.’” A bit later in the book, using the same diary entry as his source, Alperovitz construed this as “explained the role of the atomic bomb” and further on that Stimson “appears” to have “confidentially delineated the more sophisticated strategy” (that of delaying a showdown until the bomb was ready) to Eden. Thus Stimson’s reference to the bomb expands from its “bearing” on problems, to its “role” in American policy, to its part in “the more sophisticated strategy” Truman had adopted. When the words replaced by the hiatus are supplied to Stimson’s diary entry, however, it becomes clear that the cited passage supports none of these constructions. What Stimson wrote was that he had “‘told him [Eden] my own feeling as to’” the bomb’s bearing on problems. The phrase “my own feelings” makes it seem obvious that he conveyed to Eden no administration decisions of any kind.

Such examples can be found throughout the pages of Atomic Diplomacy. From an assistant secretary of the navy’s memorandum of a cabinet meeting, Alperovitz quoted Roosevelt as having said among other things that the British were “perfectly willing” for the United States to go to war with the Soviet Union, without mentioning that the secretary had noted that FDR spoke in “a semi-jocular manner.” Elsewhere, alleging that Truman’s confidence in “the strength economic aid gave to America’s ‘bargaining position,’” and his belief that “there was not much danger of a break” over the use of this lever, Alperovitz has the President prepared to let Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov know of these feelings “‘in words of one syllable.’” What Truman actually

29 The Representative in Bulgaria ([Maynard B.] Barnes) to the Acting Secretary of State, July 30, 1945, Foreign Relations . . . (The Potsdam Conference), II, 729.
30 Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy, 58.
31 Ibid., 60, 67.
32 Henry L. Stimson Diary, May 14, 1945, Henry L. Stimson Papers (Yale University Library). In an appendix, Alperovitz cited the statement again, this time with the missing words supplied (271).
33 Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy, 253. For entire memorandum, see Millis, ed., Forrestal Diaries, 36-37.
34 Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy, 29.
intended to let Molotov know of "in words of one syllable" was his belief that "unless settlement of the Polish question was achieved along the lines of the Crimea decision, the treaty of American adherence to a world organization would not get through the Senate."35 This is a rather different matter.

Just as he excluded from statements those words or phrases which did not support his themes, Alperovitz often endowed quotations with inferences which do not exist in the sources. Witness his dramatic description of the days between Russia's declaration of war on Japan and the Japanese surrender: "Aware that each hour meant a further advance of the Soviet armies, and also some loss of life, American leaders now became extremely impatient. 'Never have I known time to pass so slowly!' Byrnes recalls."36 What Byrnes recalled was that "There was little doubt that the Japanese government would respond favorably [to surrender terms], but meanwhile the war went on and every hour meant a tragic waste of life. Never have I known time to pass so slowly!'"37 His comment applied solely to the "tragic waste of life," nowhere in this passage does he indicate that advancing Red armies had anything to do with his emotional state.

Another instance of burdening words with import not found in the documents can be seen in Alperovitz's assessment of the "Atomic Diplomacy" inaugurated after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "American diplomacy changed so swiftly that few observers have caught the sweep of all the policy decisions unveiled in a few short weeks." As evidence for what he called "the breadth and scope of new diplomatic departures," he quoted Byrnes as having written that "'Those . . . days . . . were full of action.'"38 In context, however, Byrnes was discussing merely the number of items which had to be dealt with at the war's end, including matters such as the visits of General Charles de Gaulle and Georges Bidault, new department appointments, and the like. He makes no mention of any "new diplomatic departures."39

Although less obvious than his use of quotations, Alperovitz in places altered in his own words what the sources actually say. Discussing American goals in Eastern Europe, he claimed that Byrnes "has written that both he and the President felt the attempt to reduce or eliminate Soviet influence in Southeastern Europe to be one of the most important objectives of American diplomacy at Potsdam."40 In fact Byrnes wrote that he and Truman "wanted to reach agreements on four major issues," one of which was "plans for carrying out the Yalta Declaration on Liberated Europe, with the hope of ending the constant

35 Truman, Memoirs, 71-72.
36 Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy, 191.
37 James F. Byrnes, All In One Lifetime (New York, 1958), 306.
38 Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy, 194.
40 Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy, 146.
friction which had prevailed over Russian policy in eastern Europe since the Crimea Conference." While the American interpretation of the Yalta agreements most certainly would have reduced Soviet influence in that area, the far more ambitious-sounding "or eliminate" is Alperovitz's construction purely and is not to be found in Byrnes' prose.

Finally, some statements in *Atomic Diplomacy* are directly refuted by the sources from which ostensibly they derive. In one such case, involving a meeting between Harriman and Truman on April 20, 1945, Alperovitz has Harriman arguing that "a reconsideration of Roosevelt's policy was necessary." Although Harriman did in fact argue for a reconsideration of earlier policy as manifested at Yalta (as he had during FDR's lifetime), Alperovitz neglected to add that the ambassador believed Roosevelt already had done so. By using the phrase "Roosevelt's policy" instead of "earlier policy," Alperovitz makes it appear that Harriman was trying to get Truman to abandon the position Roosevelt had taken by the time of his death. His reference, Truman's *Memoirs*, does not say this:

Before leaving, Harriman took me aside and said, "Frankly, one of the reasons that made me rush back to Washington was the fear that you did not understand, as I had seen Roosevelt understand, that Stalin is breaking his agreements. My fear was inspired by the fact that you could not have had time to catch up with all the recent cables. But I must say that I am greatly relieved to discover that you have read them all and that we see eye to eye on the situation."

Alperovitz's rendition of this discussion furthered his thesis that Truman broke with his predecessor's diplomacy, but did so at the expense of the facts.

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41 *Byrnes, Speaking Frankly*, 67-68. Alperovitz rather consistently distorted what Byrnes has written. For example: "Byrnes has been quite explicit; his policy always aimed at forcing the Russians to yield in Eastern Europe, and in mid-1947 he still continued to argue that the United States had it in its power to force the Russians to 'retire in a very decent manner.'" Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy*, 234. His source for this quotation is *Byrnes, Speaking Frankly*, 295. First of all, the phrase is Karl Marx's, taken from an article he wrote in 1853 having to do with Tsarist demands on Turkey. "'If the other powers hold firm,'" Byrnes quoted Marx as having said, "'Russia is sure to retire in a very decent manner.'" Byrnes cited Marx to show that Russian goals had not changed, and argued in his text that if the other powers in 1947 would "hold firm," Russia would not "violate the integrity of Iran, Turkey, Greece, Italy, or any other country." By weaving the quotation into his own prose in such a way as to make it appear that Byrnes referred to Poland, Bulgaria, Rumania, etc., Alperovitz completely altered what Byrnes actually wrote.


43 Truman, *Memoirs*, 72. Alperovitz's analysis of W. Averell Harriman's activities emphasized the ambassador's wish to move to a "showdown" over the Polish question. Yet, although he went into considerable detail (pp. 21-29) on the state of American-Russian relations concerning this issue, he omitted the fact that on April 1, less than two weeks before his death, Franklin D. Roosevelt had sent a strongly worded message to Stalin (undoubtedly one of the "recent cables" to which Harriman referred) telling him that the United States under no circumstances could accept the Soviet Union's interpretation of the Yalta accords as they applied to the formation of the Polish provisional government. Unless Truman retreated from this position, or Stalin from his, Roosevelt's cable made a showdown inevitable. A summary of this message can be found in Herbert Feis, *Churchill Roosevelt Stalin: The War They Waged and the Peace They Sought* (Princeton, 1957), 575. Alperovitz mentioned Roosevelt's cable in an appendix (pp. 263-64), but minimized the adamant position Roosevelt had enunciated.
Alperovitz's use of evidence throughout *Atomic Diplomacy* raises disturbing questions. That a trained scholar should have resorted to such practices in a book purporting to be a scholarly study is lamentable, but relatively unimportant. That such a work, its methodology unchallenged, could have come to be considered a contribution to the historical literature on the period is far more serious. Scholars, students, and lay readers alike have been poorly served by what can only be regarded as a striking failure of the critical mechanisms within the historical profession.